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ABSTRACT

This paper reports the results of a 2-year study that examined one facet of the at-risk phenomena: teachers' construction of the status "at-risk." The status constructions were examined as they were created during teachers' use of Pennsylvania's Support Team Process, a prereferral intervention process used prior to the referral of students for special education services. Intensive observations of 24 elementary school teachers, coupled with formal and informal interviewing, focused attention on the words and actions of teachers as they addressed their perceptions of educational risk in the course of their work. Results challenge the assumption that students become at-risk as an outcome peculiar to student-centered deficiencies. The data suggest relevant connections between and among some of the contextual aspects of schooling, such as teachers' perceptions and use of time and the processes and practices that allocate the resources of compensatory and special education with teachers' perceptions of being educationally at-risk. Results, which include a demographic portrait of the population of students identified by teachers as at-risk and gifted, indicate patterns of distinction based on minority status, socioeconomic status, and gender. A comparison of the composition of each group in light of teachers' discourse on being at-risk suggests an absence of consideration of the relationship between race and socioeconomic status and educational underachievement. (Contains 63 references.) (SLD)

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The Political Work of Teaching: Teachers' Construction of the Status "At-risk"

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Abstract

This paper reports the results of a two-year study that examined one facet of the at-risk phenomena: teachers' construction of the status "at-risk." The status constructions were examined as they were created during teachers' use of Pennsylvania's Instructional Support Team Process - a pre-referral intervention process used prior to referral of students for special education services. Intensive participant observation coupled with formal and informal interviewing focused attention on the words and actions of teachers as they addressed their perceptions of educational risk in the course of their work.

This ethnographically-grounded study provides a critical discourse analysis of elementary-school teachers' construction of an at-risk status for specific students. A postmodern perspective on teachers' discourse that holds language as a productive process prompts a more politicized interpretation of teachers' discourse on educational risk and the social reality that it creates. The results of the study challenge the assumption that students become at-risk as an outcome peculiar only to student-centered deficiencies. The data suggest relevant connections between and among some of the contextual aspects of schooling, such as teachers' perceptions and use of time and the processes and practices that allocate the resources of compensatory and special education with teachers' perceptions of educational at-riskness.

The results, which include a demographic portrait of the population of students identified by teachers as "at-risk" and as "gifted," indicate patterns of distinction based on minority status, socio-economic status, and gender. A comparison of the composition of each group in light of teachers' discourse on educational at-riskness suggests an absence of consideration in teachers' work of the relationship between race and socio-economic status with educational underachievement. Insights from the study may hold relevance for those who inquire into the efficacy of ability grouping and the policies and practices that surround teachers' referrals of students for compensatory and special education services.

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Students who are described in ways that suggest they are hard to teach maintain a place in the educational dialogue despite the proliferation of programs geared towards addressing the needs of children considered at-risk of educational failure. The discourse describing the educationally at-risk appears, however, to be applied with such broad strokes that its significance tends to become obscured by the rhetoric in which it is embedded. Often, the macropolitical aims of an at-risk discourse are confounded by the shifting terrain of its ideological premises as well as by the changing populations to which it is applied. Despite the larger issues and ensuing controversies that a particular at-risk discourse may engender, factors that are inscribed in particular profiles of educational at-riskness, e.g., limited reading proficiency, minority status, cultural deprivation, English as a second language, and low socio-economic status, etc., tend to be bound together by a common theme of personal deficiency. The contexts in which particular at-risk discourses are constructed and operationalized appear to remain as subtexts neutral to the generative demeanor of the phenomenon.

This paper reports the findings of a study that was designed to elicit a description of how teachers characterize their pedagogical understandings of educational risk. The inquiry is based on the assumption that the context within which a localized discourse of risk is constructed exerts a significant influence on the words and actions of teachers. Thus, the language of teachers as they constructed a discourse of risk in the context of specific teaching arrangements was of prime research interest.

Perspectives on language and political understanding proffered by Shapiro (1981, 1987) and Foucault's (1975, 1979, 1991) investigations on how the development of discursive practices and interactive conventions produce truth and knowledge provided the study's underlying philosophical assumptions. The use of the term discourse implies a decision about how teachers' communication is to be theoretically positioned in research on teaching and learning. (Hicks, 1996, p. 51). In this study, teachers' discourse is viewed as a social communicative practice. Language is held as an inherently social construct, its meaning and function constituted relationally and contextually. It is from this perspective that the study examined how a specific discourse, i.e., a forensic discourse of risk, positions both teachers and students in relations of power. Power relations were conceptualized as a set of actions, discursive and non-discursive, that create specific objects and persons.

The Literature on the Educationally At-risk

One strong current of reform directly confronts teachers and their immediate work place, classrooms. A particular stream of initiatives purports to help the growing numbers of students who are at-risk and the teachers who must educate them (Cuban, 1989; Slavin, Karweit, & Madden, 1989; Comer, 1980; Levin, 1989). Stallings (1995) notes, however, that despite "educational interventions based upon the body of teaching and learning research from the 1970s and 1980s" there has been "little lasting effect for children at risk of school failure" (p. 4). She believes that this is so because there has been a lack of attention to the "multitude

of intervening variables" that might "prevent the best, most creative teachers from succeeding with their students" (p. 4). How classroom teachers perceive those variables and construct their pedagogical beliefs and practices to account for them was a significant aspect of the study.

When the work of teaching a student seems to create perplexing and arduous instructional situations for a teacher, an at-risk identity with compensatory and special educational need overtones can emerge. The default setting in the organization of schooling is attuned to a student's learning difficulties as an apparent indication of "personal deficiency." As one teacher recently put it during a discussion of an eight-year old, black male student's slower-than-average progress in learning to read, "You have to wonder what his capacity for learning is." Academic capabilities are perceived to be aided and abetted by extra-school curiosities such as family circumstances, socio-economic status, and minority group affiliation. For teachers, the child-as-deficient learner paradigm often creates an opportunity to adjust and realign pedagogical responsibilities. It legitimates access to resources beyond the classroom, for both the teacher and the student, in the name of helping a child at-risk.

The deficit view, the one most prevalent in the notion of at-risk as used in the context of schooling, orients solutions to educational difficulties toward the individual and their personal deficiencies. Researchers, in pointing to the increasing use of the term at-risk, and practitioners, in pointing to the increasing numbers of at-risk students are, in fact, maintaining a discourse that has an extensive history

in the educational conversation. Swadener (1995) argues that the historical traditions and antecedents of today's at-risk discourse populates many disciplines: medicine, sociology, developmental psychology, early childhood and special education, public policy, economics and demography. She asserts that the discourses of these disciplines have made "parallel and interrelated contributions to the evolution of the construct of children at-risk" (p. 21).

Examining the historical antecedents of a particular discourse is suggested by Tavares (1996) who argues that language is "a productive process that imposes a social reality ... the link between subjectivity and language is crucial to understanding the productive nature of discourses and their relation to knowledge and power" (p. 192). Understandings of the at-risk discourse, viewed from a perspective that holds language as a productive process, prompt a more politicized interpretation of the discourse and the social reality which it creates (Shapiro, 1981; Foucault, 1991; Luke, 1996).

A brief historical tour through the language, contexts, and practices of the at-risk phenomenon (regardless of its era-marked nomenclature) illustrates the shifting politics of the discourse and the pedagogical practices the discourse supported and justified (Franklin, 1994; McPartland and Slavin, 1990; Carrier, 1986; Kauffman & Pullen, 1989; Reynolds, 1989; Tropea, 1987). For example, in 1909, "retarded", "backward" and "laggard" described students who were causing "wastefulness of public funds". These economically-related student descriptors were a reflection of the "cult of efficiency", that has left a lasting impression on

how schools operate today (Callahan, 1962).

The discourse of educational at-riskness became formalized and institutionalized as the epidemiological framework for pedagogical problem-solving sired a new and burgeoning academic field, that of learning disabilities (Carrier, 1986; Senf, 1973; Silver and Hagin, 1990; Vaughn and Bos, 1987). Carrier (1986) argues that the proliferation of the handicapping construct "learning disability" is indicative of a correlation between social class and the construction of unequal educational opportunity structures. He suggests that the "broad practical reorientation away from neurology and toward educational abnormality" was a discursive turn in which learning disability "was becoming nothing more than unexplained underachievement" (p. 107). Being "learning disabled" was increasingly relied on for initial definition by how the construct developed according to a teacher's judgement and discursive presentation of student performance in classrooms (Mehan, 1996).

By the late twentieth century, argues Tavares (1996), the conflation of the doctrine of social efficiency and the hegemony of the psychological sciences "radically altered the way in which conduct was to be conceptualized and managed...by introducing an apparatus for the congregation of expert knowledge and its attendant practices". In the educational domain, this conflation conspired to mask power relationships that have been "rearticulated in a way that renders social control and regulation invisible" (p. 195).

The proliferation of various constructs to describe learning difficulties,

constructs rooted in an at-risk identity as a descriptor of student status, parallels the proliferation of special programs and treatments for those described as being at-risk. Considering a student as being at-risk of educational failure is, often, a first step in identifying a student as "learning disabled." Placing a student in a status such as "at-risk" or "learning disabled" qualifies a student for special classes, services, and treatment. Concomitantly, the organizationally-sanctioned status legitimates the allocation of extra-classroom resources.

However, the concern of educators has always been caught on the proverbial horns of a dilemma: Is the labeling and creation of categories of learners - whether based on efficiency imperatives, psychometrics, or pedagogical concerns - for the benefit of the individual or society? These goal conflicts have not yet been addressed sufficiently either by researchers or practitioners. The conflict has much to say about the work of teaching and the power relationships that structure that work.

This concise review of the descriptive discourse of - and perspectives on - the educationally at-risk suggests an inattention of teachers and policymakers, researchers and administrators, as well as society at large, to considerations of the complex social, pedagogical, and cultural factors that conspire to create this group of learners. It also raises questions as to the relative silence, in research and in practice, on the work of teaching and its relationship to a forensic discourse of risk among educators.

In terms of the work of teaching and its relationship to at-risk learners, the

research has no readily definable boundaries or foci. Popkewitz (1996) talks about the use of the concept "at-risk" as part of the "double hermeneutics" of schooling. He asserts that the term serves a rallying point for reform agendas and facilitates the discourse surrounding research and practice relating to the instruction of children with special needs. What does exist tends to look at reform programs adopted for specific at-risk populations, such as drop outs and children with low Reading achievement levels relative to grade placement, and the apparent instructional needs of such children (Slavin, Karweit, & Madden, 1989). Empirical inquiries that confront the issue of "at-risk" as a contextual, cultural, and pedagogical construction of and by teachers are rare.

The importance of addressing teachers' work and the forensic discourse of risk is suggested by Apple (1995) who argues that an understanding of the conditions of teachers' work by virtue of "their structural position as state employees ... can lead to the beginnings of a serious appraisal of power and control in society ... the work culture of teachers ... can be used for educative purposes...for clarifying the structural determinations that set limits on progressive pedagogic activity" (p. 80).

The Study

Research Perspective

Studies on at-riskness and of programs for at-risk students tend to predetermine the at-risk population by characteristics of personal identity and commence from that point. In contrast, this study takes a step backward from the

already identified, as well as from the usually identified, to confront and analyze the construction of an at-risk status during its first publicly-declared conception and organizationally-sanctioned identification.

The construction of an at-risk status, as studied in this work, was a public event embedded in the multi-faceted layers of common schooling practices as well as within the cultural nuances of a specific site. Specifically, the status constructions were examined, in large part, as they were created during teachers' engagement and use of Pennsylvania's legislatively-mandated Instructional Support Team Process (IST) as well as concomitant classroom-based instructional work (Pennsylvania Special Education Regulations, Chapter 14, and Standards, Chapter 342; Kovaleski, J. & Rodriquez-Diaz, V., 1994).

The IST Model of Collaborative Problem Solving

The IST process is a pre-referral intervention process that is based on a collaborative problem solving model. It is available in grades Kindergarten through sixth in most of Pennsylvania's public elementary schools. The purpose of the instructional support initiative was to develop school-based teams of teachers that would utilize a collaborative approach in designing and implementing curricular adaptations and instructional strategies for teachers to use with students they considered to be at-risk of failing to achieve in their classrooms.

The IST process model recognizes the institutional power of the epidemiological perspective that the deficient learner paradigm exerts in schools. In allocating organizational resources that permit response to teachers' perceptions of

educational at-riskness of students, the instructional support process admits that environmental and contextual factors are to be considered in order to offset and ameliorate the narrowness of considering the at-risk situation as only a function of student/learner deviancy. Analyzing an at-risk status construction through the IST process allows for observing and listening to teachers as they select and act on what they perceive to be educational risk factors. The process admits the power inherent in the teacher's work role to address student needs in league with the power of the organizational processes of schooling to broker additional resources to meet those needs.

The study of power in public schools is "relatively thin ... it tends to treat power as a generalized, rather than a situational, phenomenon" (Fraatz, 1987). In this study, the case for looking at power in schools "situationally" is strong. A pre-referral process used prior to recommendation for special education consideration provides a situationally-sensitive organizational event that is rich with the nuances of how power operates in public schools. The role of a classroom teacher in this event is one that is imbued with the paradox of power that teachers confront daily in their work. Teachers, on the one hand, can be "powerfully influential" in shaping the educational opportunity structures available to students but, at the same time, that power can be severely circumscribed by the "circumstances of teaching". As the IST process model challenges teachers to look beyond the narrow focus of the epidemiological perspective and to question the assumptions upon which their perceptions of risk are constructed in the context of their classrooms and in a

particularized culture of schooling, it provides a unique opportunity to view the work of teaching and teachers' conceptions of a student "at-risk" as they interact and happen.

The Site

The study was conducted in one school district that implemented the IST process in two of its five elementary schools. One of those schools served as a primary research site. The district serves an affluent community contiguous with a large urban school district. Resources in the district are plentiful. Class sizes are small (average student-teacher ratio- 18:1). There is low staff turnover. The district is known for its high caliber special education services, including the availability of a full time gifted support teacher, Reading teacher, and counselor in each school. At the specific school site, there was one special education teacher and one instructional aide per grade level. There were four Title One reading teachers serving approximately 45 students. This research site provided an opportunity for developing an expanded perspective on at-risk students in that it was an affluent suburban school district experiencing fewer problems than many of the schools that are represented in the bulk of the research on at-risk students.

Methodology

A qualitative approach utilizing field study data collection methods served as the most viable means to accomplish the research goal. Such an approach allowed for significant access to a hierarchy of opportunities in which to hear, to situate, and to analyze teachers' discourse as it was used relative to their notion of "at-

risk" in the multiple settings that comprised their teaching work. Accenting a language perspective, as language is used in multiple but related contexts, is suggested by Luke (1996) who argues that a "critical discourse analysis can tell us a great deal about how schools and classrooms build 'success' and 'failure' and about how teachers' and students' spoken and written texts shape and construct policies and rules, knowledge, and, indeed, versions of successful and failing students" (p. 11).

Given that the study was based on a theoretical orientation to language as a socio-cultural practice and social resource of a group, I adopted an ethnographically-grounded approach to an analysis of a specific discourse. This is an approach that Gee and Green (1998) support as allowing an examination of how "educational processes and practices are constructed across time ... and how discourse processes and practices shapes what counts as knowing, doing, and being within and across events in classrooms and other educational settings (e.g., staff rooms, psycho-educational diagnostic team meetings, parent-teacher conferences, and testing situations (p. 120).

The study was conducted as an open-ended intake of data via intensive participant observation, formal and informal interviews, informal conversations, professional dialogue in the various formal meetings that comprise teachers' and administrators' work outside classrooms, and interactions in the natural and everyday course of teachers' working together. A methodological approach involving field study techniques structured the design of the research and allowed

for the "progressive problem solving, in which issues of sampling, hypothesis generation, and hypothesis testing go hand in hand (Erickson, 1990, p. 136). This permitted focused attention on teachers' discourse and discursive practices as they relate to the construction of student identities and status.

Data Collection and Analysis

The sample included twenty four (24) elementary teachers who engaged the IST process for one hundred and five (105) students in Grades Kindergarten through Grade Five. The use of these case studies supported the investigation of "a contemporary phenomena within its real life context" (Yin, 1984, p. 23). Following these cases through the instructional support process yielded multiple sources of evidence. Data was also drawn from related activities that shaped the environment in which the Instructional Support Process operated. Assorted documents added pertinent written text to the collection and analyses of data.

Since teachers' conception of risk is held to be socially constructed, the data collection and analysis is accomplished using theoretical constructs adapted from social and cultural theories on risk (Johnson and Covello, 1987; Douglas, 1992; Krimsky, 1992). Drawing on sociological and anthropological perspectives on risk permits the notion that teachers do not perceive their students' behaviors and attributes, as well as their work of teaching them, through pristine eyes. Rather, the perspectives allow that such conceptions are filtered by social and cultural perceptual lenses that influence pedagogical meaningmaking. This orientation empowers analyses of that meaningmaking as it is accomplished and transmitted

via interaction with colleagues, administrators, parents, and students within particularized contexts.

The methods of data analysis were based on recommendations by Glaser and Strauss (1967), Miles and Huberman (1984, 1994) and Erickson, (1990). Data collection and analysis were given structure and form by consistent, reflective write-ups of observations and field notes from interviews and participant observation activities. The write-ups were helpful in "stimulating analytic induction and reflection on relevant theory and bodies of research literature" (Erickson, 1990, p.147). This allowed for ongoing and continually refined data analysis as the research entered its final stages.

Construction of an At-risk Status: The Discourse

An Analytical Description of Teachers' At-risk Discourse and Status Constructions

In this study, risk is not posited as an objective truth, existing independent of the cultural context within which it is constructed. "Human beings have invented the concept "risk" to help them understand and cope with the dangers and uncertainties of life" (Slovic, 1992, p. 119). By viewing "risk" and teachers' construction of an at-risk status as a subjective phenomena, pedagogical discourse can be viewed as an account of how teachers make sense of the 'wicked problems' and 'uncertainties' they face in the profusion of events that define and enliven life and the work of teaching in an elementary school and classroom. It also can be viewed as an account of how schools, through the work of teaching, endorse and perpetuate the social and cultural norms within which they operate.

In order to facilitate the description of the discourse and accomplish the analyses, I conceptualized an at-risk status construction as a process of pedagogical meaningmaking. Using a typology of the process based on a socially constructed notion of "risk" serves as an analytical device. The "real life" and "real time" discursive process of making educational at-riskness pedagogically meaningful and productive is artificially compartmentalized into a discrete set of four phases: risk perception, risk selection, risk amplification, and risk management. This allows for an analytic articulation of the status construction as teachers apprehend and give meaning to at-riskness in the context of their teaching work in classrooms as well as in the context of the work that they do in consort with their colleagues outside classrooms. The typology also permits consideration of the structural imperatives of schooling on that work as they are made apparent and relevant in teachers' discourse.

Typology of The Process an At-Risk Status Construction

Phase One: Risk Perception

Phase Two: Risk Selection

Phase Three: Risk Amplification

Phase Four: Risk Management

In the first phase, risk perception, the learning and classroom behaviors of a student and/or other personal characteristics of the student are sensed or comprehended by the teacher as indicative of learning difficulties, i.e., there is a perception of risk. During the second phase, risk selection, identified risk-related

behaviors or attributes are excerpted from all other behaviors for particular attention. During the next phase, risk amplification, the particular risk-related behavior is examined and magnified against a backdrop of learning expectations and benchmarks that structure what teachers consider "normal" or non-risk related behavior. The element of risk, selected for attention, is elaborated on or "socially" amplified in terms of the context of the teaching and learning dynamic: the classroom learning environment and the types of environmental reactions that the risk factor incurs. In the fourth phase, risk management, decisions are made and actions are taken that will address the risk-related behavior or factors in order to eliminate or ameliorate the outcome or effects of their existence. These constructive phases of an at-risk status are described and analyzed within actions that comprise what teachers' consider to be their "pedagogical work".

Through the IST process, teachers can be observed as they put their perceptions of educational at-riskness into words and act on those words. Throughout their discourse, teachers make their subjective understandings objective realities. These objective realities are constructed against the backdrop of common understandings and the practical knowledge of teachers' work. One of those common understandings is that teachers will be able to effectively manage and teach a heterogeneous group of approximately 20-25 students in the regular education program. Another common understanding is that the resources of special education services are available for teachers to access in the name of any student she perceives as at-risk in the regular education environment. Understandings of

what is a regular education program and a special education program can be seen as teachers' create the objective reality of an at-risk student.

Even though there were common themes as to what teachers selected as behaviors that were indicative of risk, it happened that the risk perceptions of teachers and the factors of risk that they selected to address were not without professional discussion, discussions that highlighted conflicting frames on how pedagogical meaningmaking was accomplished:

A first grade boy, a native of a Caribbean island, had been having a great deal of difficulty in a number of areas as reported by his teacher during the second week in school. His teacher described his difficulties when she requested IST intervention in this way on the IST Request form she submitted to the Principal:

Question: Please describe the situation that concerns you about this student and the problem that has led you to make this request.

Concerns:
1. direction following
2. letter recognition/sounds
3. distinguishing between and identifying colors
4. appropriate behavior in the classroom
5. staying on task

Question: Describe what you would like the student to do that s/he is not presently doing.

See above.

Five months later, despite the fact that the ISTeam had determined that he was making progress with the supports that had been put into place in the classroom, (i.e. ongoing instructional consultation to help the teacher provide the child with developmentally-appropriate instruction and task expectations and ninety

minutes per week of small group Reading instruction via a compensatory Reading program), a meeting was held to discuss the lack of "appropriate" progress as judged by the teacher. At the insistence of the classroom teacher and the Title One Reading teacher, the parent was invited to a meeting to discuss her willingness to have him "tested" by the psychologist to see if he was "retarded" and, therefore, qualified for special education as his needs could not be met in the regular education program. The principal, who had been in the district and in the position only two months did not attend.

> Edward is not learning despite repetitions and almost one-on-one interaction. He still cannot recognize basic colors. I showed him purple and he said "pink".
> *Chapter One Reading Teacher*
>
> Well, he was in the ballpark!
> *School Psychologist*
>
> He was not and that was just one example.
> *Chapter One Reading Teacher*
>
> I asked him to copy two sentences from the blackboard. He had to put the word "big" in one sentence and the word "little" in the other. He couldn't even do that.
> *Classroom teacher*
>
> Do you think he misunderstood the question or was he giving you another response that showed conceptual understanding even though it did not answer your question directly?
> *School Psychologist*
>
> No, I don't think he understood the question, that's the problem I'm never really sure what he is learning. He is really, really erratic. This child is getting nothing, learning nothing and now he is beginning to be a behavior problem because he knows he doesn't do as well as the other kids. He has been through two IST interventions and this hasn't helped. He isn't learning anything. He is unable to do even basic first grade work. He is on a pre-primer level and is only at the 30% on

listening for the pre-primer.
Classroom Teacher

The IST intervention notes and curriculum based assessments suggest that he is learning, he is progressing. One of the IST interventions took place during the Kindergarten year.Comparing this year to last, there has been significant improvement, even in color recognition. He reached both IST goals. The issue seems to be his rate of progress relative to the class and the class instruction that relies primarily on whole group activities is creating a gap between what he can do, is ready to learn and the rest of the class. Some of the first grade teachers have instituted flexible grouping to address the specific skill needs of students as they have found that at this grade and particularly at this time of the school year {just about mid-year} the developmental range of first graders can be very wide compounded by the range of pre-school and Kindergarten experiences that their students have been exposed to.
ISTeacher

He can't do the basic work and he is eight and a half!
Classroom teacher

(At this point the group redid the math for the classroom teacher as she had miscalculated his age. In fact, he was seven and a half).

What are his strengths? How does he learn best?
ISTeacher

I've been thinking about this since yesterday. It's hard to say since he has so much trouble most of the day. He does like to participate in class discussions and he likes to do science experiments. One of the major problems I have with him is his behavior, he always seems hungry. If I'm not careful during Center Time he'll go off to the closet and try to eat his lunch. I have another student who does that to, and this is after snack time!
Classroom teacher

Both the classroom teacher and the Chapter One teacher held specific performance expectations for this child that related to their agreement of what first graders should know and be able to do: identify basic colors accurately and be able to copy short sentences from the blackboard. Not being in command of these skills

was extrapolated into the all-inclusive phrase: "not learning". Queries by the ISTeacher and the psychologist that challenged those perceptions, did he understand the concept, what are his strengths, were challenged by adding issues, inappropriate behavior and being overage, that gave more shape, form, and credibility to the perception of risk and the selection of what risk factors had been addressed.

This was a frequently occurring pattern in teachers' discourse. Initially, one or more factors were raised as risk indicators. When asked for clarification, examples and counter examples, teachers tended to solidify their perceptions with additional risk indicators or a suggested "diagnosis". I refer to this behavior as "casemaking", wherein I mean that teachers' entered into a pattern of discourse that became one of persuasion. At this point in the status construction, teachers' risk perceptions were publicly described and action on that perception became the focus. It became the "work" of teachers to enlist the support of others to validate and legitimate their perceptions in order to garner additional organizational resources, to help the child at-risk and to maintain the integrity of the regular classes.

Construction of an At-risk Status: The Conditions

Time as a Limited Resource

A prime vehicle for legitimating these needs came through teachers' discussion of time relative to their notions of who is at-risk as well as the need to access the resources of special education. The special education processes, one

teacher/specialist reminded me are "controlled by federally-articulated time lines backed by parents' due process rights, so IST work can just sit, I'm not ending up in court..." And, as for working through the IST process for a student in academic difficulty, as one classroom teacher put it, "What about the work I need time to do for the average kid in my class, the one who gets help at home, the one who tries, completes assignments...I should be using this time to prepare for them".

The data analysis yielded evidence that strongly suggested that time is an important player in teachers' construction of an at-risk status in that it is constructed over time, within specific time frames of the school year (Richardson et al, 1989), within time frames of the scope and sequence of the curriculum (Fraatz, 1987) and from an epidemiological perspective of child development (Crow, 1978). Issues of time pointed out in others' work were further substantiated in this study. Data indicated that teachers' notions of the at-riskness of a child become enmeshed in a matrix of time variables that include things such as chronological age, time of the school year, time that teachers give to instruction, and to providing individual help. Administrative structures such as time lines for referrals to special education (Mehan, Hertwick and Miehls, 1986) and those associated with pre-referral processes also are prominent in teachers' perceptions of students at-risk.

Feelings of power or powerlessness that teachers experience and speak to in their working lives frequently revolves around issues of time. It also speaks to issues of power in determining the conditions under which teachers perform their

"labor". This relates to the organizational resources that teachers have the power to garner, resources that will adjust the instensification of their work. This, in turn, speaks to issues that shape teachers' perceptions and constructions of educational at-riskness.

The Linkage of Resources and Teachers At-risk Status Constructions

Time is an important commodity to teachers. When teachers feel "pressed for time" in which to accomplish their teaching work, they re-position themselves from their considered positions as powerless pawns of constraining time structures to power brokers of resources, resources that can loosen the restraints they feel imposed on their work by various frames of time: e.g., time of the academic year, time allocation to students during instruction, time to cover the curriculum according to district time frames, administrative time frames.

In an informal conversation at lunch one day, a group of five third and fourth grade teachers were complaining about the demands of heterogeneous classes that had special education students "included", coupled with the demands that "putting a child through the instructional support process" now added to their teaching day. Adding further stress to the demands of the teaching day was the expression of their feelings that the school operated in an environment that was "too highly sensitive" to parental demands. The teachers itemized these demands as parental expectations for "accelerated" learning for gifted and high-achieving students especially in math and reading instruction, a press for more use of computers in the classroom, and parental critiques of homework and class assignments that tended

to the rote and were undifferentiated according to student needs, interests, and ability.

Ms. Hendrix, a teacher with 26 years experience in grades 2 through 4, all in the same district but in three different elementary schools described her sense of classroom "time" and the impossibility of meeting student needs, instructional demands, and parental agendas in this way:

> We have ... ah, maybe ... five good instructional hours a day ... on a normal day, you know, not Thursday with those instrumental music lessons that disrupt the whole morning, or a day with an assembly, but just a regular no-interruption day ... you have 5 good hours you can count on. If you have 22 students in the class that averages out to 13.6 minutes of individual time ... with the emotional and academic needs these kids have, I just don't have the time to spend with really needy kids without shortchanging someone else.

One might surmise from this teacher's lament that a decrease in class size or number of needy kids, less interruptions or less demanding parents might enable her to "get to" those needy kids. She links the attention she sees them as needing to providing them with one-on-one assistance. This is not an unusual comment on what teachers feel is "good" practice in meeting the needs of at-risk students. In the teacher interview that is part of the IST data gathering process, teachers frequently lament the increased difficulty of "getting kids into" special education programs because "what they need is one-on-one attention", "someone who can work with them at their pace", "teach them until they get it without slowing the rest of the class down".

> I don't think it's just her language that's slowing her down, it takes her so long to write an answer. I can't slow down the rest of the class. I have to keep moving on. I think she has a processing problem.

Fourth grade girl, recent immigrant from a Caribbean island

These students required more time, time that teachers needed to "buy" by accessing the ESL teacher, the IST program or any other resource that could reteach, provide practice for the student, time for activities that the teacher "did not have". The ultimate time resource could be found in the special education program. By linking the need for more time to be instructed to a student deficiency. in this case a "processing problem" rather than an instructional pattern, the teacher could work towards legitimizing the need for special education.

I argue here that when teachers publicly construct a status for a child that they feel is at-risk of educational failure, that they are reacting to the "intensification" (Apple, 1982, 1986) of their work by utilizing other systemic processes and procedures that may alleviate the pressures they feel from time constraints compounded by the increasing diversity and heterogeneity of skills possessed by the students that they are required to teach, a requirement that is constructed devoid of the realities and complexities of specific group dynamics. It is a "one-size fits all" requirement with the misfits placed at-risk by casting doubt on their abilities to learn in a regular education setting. The child is, therefore, placed at risk due to environmental and contextual factors in which he serendipitously lands. This may appear to be a harsh judgement of teachers. But the constructions are not just born out of the need to simplify a teacher's schedule or the complexity of pedagogical decisionmaking with a diverse group of learners. Teachers explain their decisions in terms of "helping the child", "getting him what

he needs", saving him embarrassment because "if we don't do anything, he is still going to know that he isn't doing well, the kids know who needs help". Teachers argue for IQ tests so that they "know what they can reasonably expect" a child to do.

Time is a crucial resource for teachers that feel they must control and use wisely. When teachers feel pressed for time to do everything that they need to do for their students, to "do their job", they look for other ways within the system available to gain time. Time becomes an apparent variable in teachers constructions of an at-risk status. Viewed as a socially constructed variable, time is an outcome of the context, a dependent variable and an independent variable, a constructor of the context. Thus, teachers are at once powerful in creating some of the contextual arrangements that contribute to the at-risk identities of their students and are powerless in adjusting other factors of the context. How teachers go about their pedagogical decision-making in their uses of time and the garnering of resources for specific children raises other issues of who becomes at-risk in schools.

The Power of An At-risk Discourse

The notion or concept of at-riskness holds power in schools in that it implies that some students have learning difficulties that require specialized treatments if schools are to attain their mission. The epidemiological perspective on educational at-riskness is conversant with the "official knowledge" (Apple, 1993) that drives school practices. It serves to legitimize the regular teaching practices in

classrooms insofar as those practices need to be acknowledged as "good" practices that are "effective" if it is to be accepted as necessary the creation of pedagogical "treatments" for students that do not fit the norm. This notion of a "special pedagogy" for the learning disabled is the impetus behind the growth in special education programs. The power of the existence of this growing aspect of the education system can be seen and heard in the public discourse of teachers as they label and describe children as learners and as at-risk. It is in their discourse, their episodes of professional collaboration, and their public pronouncements of who is "at-risk", that one can see the power of the epidemiological model shaping the pedagogical meaning-making of teachers and, therefore, their understandings of their teaching work.

When teachers construct an at-risk status for a child they are naturalizing the inequalities in the educational and school system because the student is a product of that system or culture. Performing poorly in school is not a state of being, it is a state of becoming. It results from interactions in the school, with people in positions structured by the school and who are oriented and socialized by the whole field of forces in which the system takes place. Unfortunately, the forensic use of an at-risk discourse remains silent on the disabling aspects of context, leaving only student deficiency as its critical mark for solving the problem. However, by casting context as irrelevant, the epidemiological perspective on learning deficiencies and the concomitant notions of at-riskness that ensue, embody an ideology of practice that protects the dominant classes and the

reproductive powers of schooling.

In the context of this study, rich resources for treating students with documented special educational needs existed. Teachers often made a case that students were at-risk because they needed one-on-one assistance, extra time to do work or that in general they were "timeconsuming". Garnering the resources of special education in the name of helping a student at-risk alleviated the time problem for teachers. A structure that was perceived by teachers as restraining, i.e. time, could be overcome by a structure that was perceived by teachers as expansive, the structure of special education. In order to access these resources student needs must be cast as one of inherent deficiency, and therefore, the student was at-risk. What constituted "risk", however, can better be understood in the context of its meaning development.

A Social Concept of Risk

Research in risk analysis suggests that people do not select or attend to "risks" on the basis of broad assumption such as protection of the environment or human health, but rather the selection is rooted in a complex interaction involving beliefs about values, social institutions, nature and moral behavior. Risks can be ignored, eliminated, or exaggerated according to the social, cultural, and moral acceptability of the underlying activities.

What guides teachers and schools in selecting the risks to attend to in constructing an at-risk status for a child? Are there common assumptions among teachers that particular "risks" are necessary to address in order to address the

learning needs of children? What is the connection between what teachers perceive as "risks" and the cultural imperatives of schooling and the idiosyncracies of particular school districts, schools and classrooms? Considering teachers' perceptions of risk from a socio-cultural perspective is helpful in analyzing teachers' discursive arrangements that create an at-risk status.

The individuals or groups who collect information about risks communicate with others, and through behavioral responses act, in the terminology of Kasperson (1992) as "amplification stations". Role related considerations and membership in social groups shape the selection and use of information that is regarded as significant. As the individuals and groups act as members of a cultural group and larger social units, they affect the dynamics and the social processing of risk. "Individuals in their roles as employees of social groups or institutions do not only follow their personal values and interpretive patterns, they also perceive risk information and construct the risk problem according to cultural biases and the rules of their organization or group (Johnson and Covello, 1987).

The social sciences offer an amalgam of different conceptualizations of risk, conceptions that center either on special aspects of risk or the circumstances of risk. Sociological approaches to risk consider the phenomenon from two perspectives: 1) individualistic versus structural and 2) objective versus constructivist. The first pair of attributes signify the base unit of analyses. In this study, risk was analyzed as a structural dimension. From this perspective, educational risk was asserted as a complex social phenomenon that could not be

explained by interrogating individual behavior alone. The second pair of attributes suggest the varying perspectives on the nature of risk and its manifestations. In this study, risk was asserted as a constructivist concept, as a social artifact of institutional life. I contend that notions of educational risk or becoming at-risk in elementary school are functions of the social system, the world view, the ideological premises of the group that shape perceptions of risk. Therefore, teachers' practical conceptions of educational at-riskness, as risk was manifested in this study, can be illustrative as to the cultural and social norms that influence the beliefs and practices of schooling and the work through which those practices and beliefs are carried forward.

The historical antecedents of the notions of risk attest to its connotation today of the probability of danger. However, its more modern usage begets an understanding of risk in its work as a social construct used for political purposes. Risk is a term that has been employed to meet the

> practical needs of industrialized societies to regulate technology and to protect their citizenry from natural and technological hazards. From its inception the study of risk was positioned at the intersection of academic, governmental, and industrial interests. Rising concern about environmental hazards, in conjunction with growing corporate fears about liability, brought risk assessment and risk management to the foreground in the public and private sectors (Krimsky and Golding, 1992, p. xiii).

The notion of risk, therefore, carries with it an aura of science and the pretension of possible precise calculation.

The use of a notion of risk by teachers speaks to its forensic application and,

therefore, its power. In constructing an at-risk status, teachers point to those behaviors that are debated as indicative of danger to the contextual order of the teaching and learning dynamic. For example, that order is maintained through her work of teaching "on grade level" and maintaining classroom order by making sure students follow directions. The student is "near danger" or "at-risk" because certain behaviors of students, argues teachers, e.g., not reading at grade level, not following directions, are dangerous to their learning, to their thriving, to their survival, in a particular teaching context. The danger may be described from varying perspectives. Simply put, the extremes are that one may perceive the danger as existing because of the inability of the schooling process to affect learning in a child. Or, one may perceive it as the inability of a child to learn, despite the teacher's work. The latter is the perspective from which the danger is most commonly addressed in schools. The end result is that a student is identified and assigned a status which invokes a set of organizational responses. Those organizational responses are set in motion so that the agreed upon contextual order of the teaching and learning dynamic remains undisturbed. In approaching the risk of having "non learners" in schools solely from the viewpoint that there is something wrong with the "non learner" is to leave the work of teaching, and its underlying beliefs and practices, uninterrogated.

Threats to school order, who is at-risk and why, are not determined by an objective scientific analyses. (My data indicate, however, that teachers, argue for an "objective scientific" analysis and, therefore, a validation of their perceptions via

a psychological assessment of those who they perceive to be at-risk.) Rather, threats to the order of schooling, the naming of who is at-risk, are constructed from the beliefs, and the commonly-held meanings that structure those beliefs and the rational actions of the actors who control the order of the context by acting on those beliefs. For example, one of the common understandings of teachers in this study is the notion of grade level. Students who are considered by teachers as "on grade level" do not pose threats to the organization of schooling, in particular to the lock step progression of grade by chronological age and the use of the instructional materials of each grade. Measurement of on-grade-level, however, is an imprecise, practical exercise done by teachers in the course of their work. It can best be described as a qualitative judgement that rests on a random use and application of measures such as IRIs (Individual Reading Inventories), standardized testing scores, teachers' subjective judgements, and grades on report cards. At a number of points during the year, a teacher determines the proximity to grade level of her students: at parent conferences, on report cards and, most significant to the construction of an at-risk status, in the Spring of the school year when teachers compile grade lists for the following year. The forms that teachers completed and used when lists were compiled, with an eye toward assembling heterogenous classes, structured their group sense of who was at-risk. This group belief was intimately tied to the notion of grade level.

I contend, based on evidence gathered and studied in the course of this research, that teachers' notions of risk are social constructs. Who is at-risk is a

social construct in that the notion of "risk" is influenced by the social interaction (the text) and structural forces with the context. For example, the following structure the meaning perspectives of teachers on their work: 1) agreed upon and implicit understandings and meanings of grade level influence grouping practices and classroom group structures; 2) the age-graded promotion scheme influences how teachers enact the "grade-level" curriculum; 3) the time teachers perceive and use as available for the instructional work of teaching and the work that they do outside the classroom; 4) the availability of special education resources. These forces speak to the hegemony of the institutional practices that originally construct the at-risk "problem".

The Political Work of Teaching: Making a Case for At-riskness

The productive function of an at-risk discourse is geared toward legitimating a student's perceived inability to learn in a classroom as measured against a teacher's sense of her teaching work. If the risk-related behavior can be legitimized as exceeding what is included in the culturally-sanctioned normal routine of a regular teacher's work, the work of the teacher would remain unquestioned and the root of the problem would remain in the purview of the child's abilities. Teachers' at-risk discourse then is a productive one, teachers are making a case that supports their perception that students are at-risk and are in need of resources beyond the regular classroom.

The work of teaching as it is seen in teachers' construction of an at-risk status can be described as an organizational arena for the political allocation of

resources. In analyzing the actions and the discourse that occurs in this arena, an elucidation of teachers' conceptions of "risk" suggest that when teachers use and act on the expression and their understandings of "at-risk", they are putting forth an hypothesis that there is a dysfunction between the work that they are to do and the outcome of that work. Therefore, one must view that work as a productive act. As a productive act, resources are expended. Therefore, teachers' work is one that is marked by the allocating of resources, an activity of political economy.

I contend that teaching work is rooted in contextually-relevant pedagogical meaning-making. Pedagogical meaning-making refers to the decisions and actions teachers make and perform in order to accomplish the work of teaching. As such, teaching work is political in nature. The teaching work that results in the identifying of a student as "at-risk", is comprised of a synthesis of pedagogical meaning-making through which other organizational agendas are accomplished. For example, I have argued that teachers' notions of educational at-riskness are bounded by teachers' perceptions of what they are to accomplish in classrooms with children and by the structural conditions of their work, namely time and the existence of extra-classroom resources. These structures allow the power of organizational agendas such as the allocation of resources and the stratification of student status's. They have to do with power issues that are organizational or collective in nature, such as the power of certain paradigms or beliefs to control educational decisionmaking and issues of power that affect individuals and their "place" in the organization, such as the labeling of individuals as "at-risk" or their

actions as "deviant".

The educational discourse of risk is at best "describable" in a relationship with a set of other practices, best understood within "the specific relationships which link... {it} to other practices" (Foucault, 1991, p. 64). Speece and Keogh (1996) note the absence of work that has been accomplished on classroom context and achievement issues, particularly as it relates to young children. The data from this study suggests that understanding how teachers construct an at-risk status, in the context of their work in classrooms and in the larger structures and process that affect classrooms, bears directly on the interplay of context and achievement, in particular that aspect of the context that is the work of teaching.

The discourse of at-riskness is mediated by a complex political economy. My interpretation of teachers' perspectives on educational at-riskness suggests that a forensic vocabulary of risk is one that justifies a student sorting arrangement, arrangements that endeavor to maximize the efficiency of and protect the arrangements of schooling. Analysis of the discourse suggests that the frames that teachers use are a continuation of the historical perspective on at-riskness complete with its ambiguity: protect the regular classes from the burden of the at-risk by giving such students what they need to learn --- but, in some other place. Teaching work is shaped and given meaning by the need to maintain classroom and consequently, school-wide order, while achieving compliance with district and school-based instructional practices and policies and norms. In fact, such work maintains the status quo allowing the real needs of students, especially those at-

risk, to become secondary to the need of maintaining the existing structures and processes of the bureaucracy. The construction, indeed, the legitimized existence of an at-risk status into which particular students were placed validates the power of the prevailing norms of schooling and the power of the teacher to perpetuate those norms.

The Politics of a Silenced Discourse

Teachers' everyday and practical discourse on at-riskness, however politically-framed, remains strangely mute on issues that have been of particular interest to educational researchers. These issues relate to the relationship of race, gender, and social class with school achievement issues and to schools as a medium for the reproduction of society's class structure. For example, McDermott and Vareene (1995) note that "for the past thirty years, the anthropology of education has been dominated by the question of how to talk with rigor and respect about children, particularly minority children, who fail in school" (p. 330). Ogbu (1988) confronted minority underachievement from a view that racial stratification creates its own "oppositional process that cuts across class boundaries" (p. 179). Oakes (1988) argues that schools often respond to race and class in ways that exacerbate the difficulties of minorities and the poor. Assessments of students' ability and their assignments to ability groups and curriculum tracks is one of the most obvious examples of this nexus of student characteristics and school experiences" (p. 106).

Researchers, whatever their particular interest or philosophical vantage point,

are actively inquiring into the interface of schooling structures, practices, and processes with the heterogeneity of its clientele in light of powerful forces, such as capitalism and cultural imperatives, forces that appear to infuse the interface with substance and meaning. However, as McCarthy and Apple (1988) point out, conceptualization of and approaches to the triad of concerns critical to these research endeavors occur on a "very abstract level". What is needed, they argue, is more direct inquiries into the "ways in which raced, classed, and gendered variables in all their contradictory ways operate in the educational setting" (p. 28).

As I conducted this research I noted that my own notes held a decided absence of these issues in teachers' discourse, notwithstanding the few off-the-cuff comments such as "I don't care what color they are, I only care what they can do", "We know that the community that they come from {the black students} well, they just don't get much support from home so are we balancing for color or do we look at their needs?" and "race is such a fragile issue...there are no rules". The constructs were not absent from the context, but, in the relative silence, comments on those constructs, comments that only lightly sprinkled the discourse, seemed to signify even more than the words implied.

Concomitant with either a controlled silence or lack of sustained attention to these issues, was the fact that as I switched practical roles from working with the identified "gifted population" to working with students at-risk, the demographic profile of the population of students with whom I worked changed, most overtly in terms of race. Less apparent was the shift in social class and gender although

obvious enough that I began to look more closely at the demographic construction of these two sub-populations, the identified gifted and the identified at-risk, in terms of not only race but gender and social class as well.

The student population at this school averaged 560 during this study. The minority population accounted, on average, for approximately 8% of those students. The majority population was white, predominately middle class with some upper class representation.

During this study the students identified and served in the gifted support program averaged 37 students. None were African American. One student had been recommended for consideration by his teacher but he had not achieved the requisite 130 IQ score that would have rendered him "exceptional" and, therefore, eligible for gifted support services.

In contrast, of the 105 cases that teachers brought to the ISTeam during this study, 42 were minority students. On one particular day, early in the 1997-1998 school year, my notes reflected that teachers had contacted me about 14 students, either to tell me that they had concerns or to ask if the ISTeam had information on the students. Eleven of those students were African American. While I had been compiling a demographic profile of the students brought to IST during the two years of the study, 1995-1996 and 1996-1997, my emphasis had been on how teachers constructed an at-risk status. During that time, my analysis yielded a demographic profile with a heavy male and minority representation, with black males overly- represented in the at-risk population relative to their representation in

the general population.

My analysis also yielded a relative lack of teacher attention to issues of race, social class, and or gender as teachers spoke about educational at-riskness. Despite the lack of attention to the issues in their discourse, the numbers began to suggest some important trends in issues that may be underlying the at-risk constructions. For example, during the 1996-1997 school year, there were 22 black boys in the school. Of that group, nine (9) were already receiving special education services and six (6) were brought to the Instructional Support Team. Of the remaining seven (7), 3 were receiving compensatory Reading help, 3 were in Kindergarten where that program was not available. The remaining boy was a first grader who the teacher described as a "discipline problem" but "bright and able to read". He, like the 3 Kindergarten boys, was not receiving any help outside the classroom.

During that same year, there were 21 black girls in the school. Of that group, 14 were receiving compensatory Reading services, 4 were brought to the ISTeam and the remaining 3 were not receiving any extra-classroom resources. No black girls were receiving special education services. (As noted above, during this study no African-American students were found to be eligible for the gifted support program and none were being served by the program. In fact, a review of the student profile of the five years previous to the study revealed that only one African American girl was in the gifted support program. As during the study, the student population averaged 8% African American.)

In relation to gender, the dichotomy of populations was not quite as severe between the gifted support and IST populations. In the population of the gifted program, representation of boys ran slightly higher than girls, with an average of 55/45 split during the five years. However, in the 1996-97 school year, the trend was reversed with the girls (15) outnumbering the boys (12) with the same average representation. In the IST population, the 70 cases represented 44 boys and 26 girls. Fourteen (14) of the boys were minority; six (6) girls were minority. This represents a 63/37 split with boys outnumbering the girls in both years, twenty (20) the first year; twenty-four (24) the second.

Issues of social class were only impressionistic, as I had no reliable way to measure the distinction. Anecdotally, the social class issue gave an impression only insofar as students in the IST process tended to live in the less affluent neighborhoods (as measured by the median prices of homes in specific areas) than those in the gifted support program. Overall, the students in the IST program were more often participants in the reduced lunch program and tended to live in the less desirable neighborhoods of the school's attendance area.

At the site of this research teachers, mostly white and middle to upper class females, worked with a student population that is primarily white and middle to upper class. The attendance area, however, holds a pocket of families considered "economically disadvantaged". The school is situated in an affluent suburb complete with all the accoutrements that can supposedly bring all children to, if not high, at least fairly good and acceptable levels of achievement. Yet, some students

stuttered on the path of academic progress and were identified as at-risk by their teachers and called to the attention of the Instructional Support Team. Many more than should have been, statistically speaking, were members of minority groups. There was also a disturbing trend in the representation of black girls and boys in special education.

My point in juxtaposing the demographic profiles of the identified at-risk population and the identified gifted population, as well as highlighting it against the entire school population, is to accent a subtext of the at-risk phenomenon that is apparent in the demographic profile of who is often considered at-risk. However, this apparency was rarely an issue that was directly confronted or addressed in practice by teachers as they constructed an at-risk status. There appeared to be a border between what teachers spoke to in their at-risk constructions and what they left unsaid. "When we say that schooling constructs borders, we mean that it enables and/or constrains relations of power (both discursive and extra discursive) and that these relations not only influence cognitive capacities but also speak to the way in which power is inscribed in the body, culture, space and subjectivities" (McLaren and Giarelli, 1995, p. 5). The absence, or silence, on issues of race, social class and gender appeared to construct a border, a border that maintained the power of the status quo.

Sultana (1995), in arguing for the privileging of silence in ethnographic work, notes that "silences ... often are registered but not so often highlighted and analyzed" leading to "a danger that the ethnographic narrative entraps the writer

and reader in this nominal positivist world: details of what happened, who spoke, what was said. The dictatorship of data, from which concepts and generalizations arise" (p. 114). To leave the issues that were unaddressed by teachers unaddressed in this study, would be to miss a critical aspect of the at-risk discourse, and yet an aspect that remained silent in practice. I did not want to silence the silence in my own work.

The discourse, as I heard it during the course of this study, illustrates that practical understandings of social and economic class, race, and gender, remain unaddressed during the work of pedagogical decision-making and therefore, remain deflected and unexamined issues rather than informative ones as to who achieves in school and who falters. By remaining unquestioned constructs and influences, practices and beliefs remain as is. "To privilege silence is to realize that text is ideology inasmuch as it attempts to reflect the world in a coherent and totalizing manner" (Sultana, 1995, p. 115). Privileging silence, so that it can "speak in favour of a more just and humane world" is suggested by Sultana as he accords with Eagleton (1976) that "ideology exists because their are some things which must not be said" (cited in Sultana, p. 123).

In the few instances when such issues surfaced, particularly in terms of race, it most often became an issue of "measuring up to our standards", i.e. white, middle class standards. In one instance, when a black father, who had recently immigrated with his wife and three children from a Caribbean country to pursue a doctoral degree in educational psychology, challenged his son's teacher for her

view of his son as learning disabled, he described his chagrin at what he described as "the teacher's insensitivity to the fact that my child is the only black child in the class and who becomes shamed by having his name put on the board because- she says - he doesn't start working as fast as the others". In the course of the IST work to adjust classroom management practices to encourage on-task behaviors but alleviate the child's distress, the teacher's response was to claim that "I am only interested in his performance...putting his name on the board, well, I do that with everyone, except he is so often off-task that his name is up there the most, and, yes, usually the only one ... but that's the classroom policy ... that's how I run my classroom". For the teacher, the issue was one in which the father was trying to make a racial issue out of an academic deficiency. "If he wants him to go to school here, he'll have to measure up, but I don't think he can. He can't keep up with his peers, most are reading above grade level and he {the student} is half a grade level below in reading...I think the father thinks I'm a racist".

Carrier argues in his political analysis of the move to include learning disability as a category in special education, that learning disability theory is not one that simply maps "on to some supposed set of dominant class interests...to a degree...the Marxist model can account for learning disabilities theory, but only if one does not use the model mechanistically and does not ignore the complexity and tenuousness of the process of legitimation" (p. 90). The complexity appears in the bifurcation of theory on learning disability: one thread accounting for the poor performance of the disadvantaged poor, the other thread uses it as an explanation

of underachievement for certain middle and upper class children. A theory of educational at-riskness must be aware of these issues as well. The complexity of the at-risk discourse recasts that bifurcation, one thread accounting for the needs of children (relativity of the theory), the other thread accounting for the needs of the organization (the productive aspect of the theory).

Constructing an at-risk status is a situational event, one in which power inheres in the role and work of teaching. The work that teachers do in constructing such a status offers support to Sarason's theory (1971) that teachers are "potentially powerfully influential." By using a political anthropological perspective, one can view the social behavior of teachers in terms of its political construction and influence. The discourse and discursive practices of teachers can then be analyzed as artifacts of the social systems that define the work of teaching and schooling practices. Viewing the role of teachers and the work of teaching from a political perspective provides an analytical framework allowing for a display of the linkage of power distribution and enactment in a school society. Without consideration of this perspective, opportunities for the continuing development of a critical pedagogy among researchers and practitioners are lessened.

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